

Anorexia

Anorexia is a serious mental health condition which concerns a loss of appetite along with an attempt to gain control over unmanageable feelings. Individuals control their appetite by creating a system of eating little and surviving on less, where eventually they may starve themselves to death. They may have anxiety, particularly about eating in front of other people, show poor self-esteem along with a low confidence of self, and have difficulty remembering and poor concentration. Starvation affects all the body's organs, including the brain and muscle tissue. There are many physical problems associated with anorexia such as: gut, heart, bowel and kidney complaints, feeling tired and cold because of poor circulation, an increased risk of infertility, osteoporosis, and erosion of tooth enamel. Anorexics also have a weakened immune system and become anaemic. Possible signs of someone who is anorexic include:

- Doing lots of exercise.
- If under eighteen, weight and height is lower than expected.
- Missing meals or avoiding eating any foods they see as fattening.
- Believing they are fat when they show a healthy weight.
- Taking appetite suppressants to reduce hunger.
- Periods stopping (pre-menopausal) or not starting in young females.
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded.
- Dry skin and hair loss.
- Inducing vomiting or taking laxatives.
- Lack of sexual interest.
- Swelling of hands, face, and feet.

If people do not eat enough, their bodies go into survival mode, and they develop a soft downy hair called 'lanugo'. With anorexics, eating is associated with expressing a desire to become dependent, but at the same time allowing themselves to be dependent is terrifying. The paradox is, that while they want to believe they do not need to become dependent on others, they may end up in hospital with twenty-four-hour care, where others must feed

them. Anorexia remains one of the leading causes of death related to mental health problems, with deaths due to physical complications or suicide.

Guide for Caregivers

Encourage your son or daughter to engage in activities and do something enjoyable with friends. Try and persuade them to have mindful eating behaviours such as focusing on the food that they like and cooking healthy meals. Make sure they are surrounded by loved ones during mealtimes. Encourage them to practice relaxation techniques to develop a natural response when stress levels are increased.

Getting professional support as soon as possible gives your young person the best chance of recovering from anorexia. The diagnosis of anorexia is so complex, consisting of psychological, biological, and environmental factors. Once referred, their GP will ask questions about the young person's eating habits, how they are feeling, and will check their overall health and weight. They may also refer them for some blood tests to make sure their weight loss is not caused by something else. If a GP believes a young person is anorexic, they will refer them to an eating disorder specialist. These are highly trained professionals who are equipped to help individuals establish self-soothing techniques, meal plans, and personalized coping mechanisms.

In time, individuals can build the resilience needed to fully recover from their anorexic disorder. Caregivers can talk in confidence to an adviser from Beat, the UK's leading charity supporting those affected by eating disorders. You can reach them in person by calling its adult helpline on 0808 801 0677 or youth helpline on 0808 801 0711, beateatingdisorders.org.uk info@beateatingdisorders.org.uk

Ref: Dr Steph Adam

www.stephadam.co.uk